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Narrative Rehearsal, Expression, and Goethe's "Wandrer's Nachtlied II"

Richard Eldridge

It is by now all but a commonplace that modern human subjects face increased difficulties in finding and sustaining meaningful orientation and routes of significant interest in life in comparison with their forebears in less technologically advanced circumstances. To be sure, modernity brings significant advantages with it. Not only are there the benefits of modern technologies of food production, medicine, transportation, and so on in easing the material conditions of life, there are also the charms of being able to an increased extent to choose for oneself what sort of social identity to develop from among a wider array of possibilities. Constraints of income, circumstance, available options, and opportunities and expectations set by others still no doubt exist, but there are also both new possibilities and increased degrees of geographic and social mobility. No one in 1200 C.E. could move from Kansas or Kuala Lumpur or Kinshasa to Manhattan or Mumbai or Moscow in order to get an education and become a polymer chemist, plumber, police officer, professional tennis player, or performance artist.

With these increased possibilities of social identity, however, there often also come increased uncertainties and anxieties. Human beings at any level of culture are always and everywhere capable of reflection and are hence the kinds of beings who are capable of calling their own being into question.

This fact is rooted in the emergence in us of specifically discursive consciousness as opposed to mere sensory intake. Unlike other animals, we classify things under concepts, sometimes the very same physical object under different concepts, depending on our contexts of use and engagement with it. Or—depending on your views about animals and concepts—we do so at least with enormously greater plasticity and flexibility of attention than do other animals. Hence we can ask, is this (stick) a weapon, a piece of firewood, a building material, or a drawing implement? Given our plasticities of engagement and attention, questions of correctness arise for us in a way in which they do not arise for other animals, and these questions of correctness have to do also with what is wanted of us in a given context and with how others are engaging with an object of attention.

Cultures existing at subsistence level have to get things right—is that a tiger?—but they are not so much occupied with reflection on plasticities of attention, engagement, and practice. Strongly tribal or traditional cultures may slot their members into courses of action with few alternatives and without much occasion for reflection. In modernity, however, things are different. With the growth of scientific and technological knowledge, increasing urbanization, and expanding market economies, diversity within cultures becomes the norm. Individuals begin to have to make a way of life, more and more by skill and will and less and less by necessity and tradition. The question of how it is best or most fruitful or right to live becomes pressing. This question arose in some form in urban centers in the ancient world—for example, in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. But even there this question arises in part as a function of urbanization and the increase in possibilities of subjective particularity that it brings with it. These possibilities of subjective particularity then explode with increasing force at least from the early seventeenth century onwards (with complicated, interesting roots and antecedents).

Once reflection on attention and on engagements with the world has begun, it is both urgent and all but impossible to rein it in. It is urgent in that, without reflection of the right kind, subjective particularity is in danger of running riot and culminating in all kinds of unchastened competitive individualism, factionalism, and violence, particularly as religion declines in cultural authority with the rise of science. It is all but impossible to rein it in, in that no absolute ontological ground is available to discursive consciousness, from which it emerges and knowledge of which might guide its course. Think of Hölderlin's "Sein und Urteil" fragment or of Wordsworth's sense of his fall out of naturalness and into discursivity.

In the absence, then, of available fundamentalisms, one possible way of arriving reflectively at modes of attention and engagement in which one can believe, or in which one can believe more fully, is through narrative rehearsal. One may be unable to know by theorizing, or have at hand no ready way to know, what human life as such is *for*. But one might hope to come to a better, clearer sense of what one's particular life might best or better look like, and this sense might manifest itself in feeling that one has thought through certain possible larger shapes of life, for oneself and possibly for some like-minded and like-situated others. That is, one might tell a story to oneself and others about how one might move in time from A to B to W, hoping that certain imagined itineraries will emerge in feeling as better supporting conviction in their ability to sustain a sense of lived meaningfulness than do some others. This strategy—imaginative, narrative rehearsal of possibilities, thence tested in feeling for whether or how well they support a sense of lived meaningfulness—at any rate was prominently taken up and developed in Germany in the decades immediately following 1781, as German thinkers and writers struggled both with how to receive Kant's critical philosophy, given its dismissal of the possibility of ultimate metaphysical knowledge, and with larger problems of secularization and social pluralization. Just what, it was wondered, are we to do with ourselves, and how are we to support a lived answer to this question, if both the will of God in any detail is unavailable to us and we cannot know theoretically what we are and are made for?

To the extent, then, that we continue to live within a modern cultural dispensation, with senses of social possibility, of the unavailability of ultimate metaphysical knowledge, and of a consequent need for meaningful orientation in life, which senses resemble the sense of the human subject that was prominent in post-Kantian Germany, it may be of some help to consider exactly how Kant and some of his successors turned to narrative in the service of emotional clarification about possibilities of meaningful life.

One place in which it is especially clear that Kant is caught up in an agon of reflection on fit or fruitful modes of life, aiming at but failing to achieve full assurance in cultural practice, is his 1786 essay "What Is Orientation in Thinking?" In this essay Kant argues, along Cartesian lines, that "it is possible to remain secure against all error if one does not venture to pass judgment in cases where one's knowledge is insufficient for the judgment in question" (1991, 240). This is often a valuable policy in the exact sciences.

There are, however, also cases in which there is a need to pass judgment despite the insufficiency of knowledge, notably cases involving judgments of rightness in action. In these cases we may, Kant argues, first, establish that a concept is free from contradiction, and, second, use only pure concepts of the understanding, free from all sensible content, in formulating judgments. In this way, we may in particular come to a purely rational belief (that does not, however, amount to knowledge) in the existence of a God without any sensible characteristics and who provides no reliable evidence of his presence in history. The belief in such a God is, Kant argues, practically necessary in that we need, in order to achieve orientation in both theory and practice, to assume that there is purposiveness in nature and that God exists as its only possible ground, even if he neither displays himself within this purposiveness nor makes its direction evident. This purely rational belief is then "the signpost or compass . . . [such that] the man of ordinary (but healthy) reason can use it to plan his course, for both theoretical and practical purposes, in complete conformity with the whole end of his destiny" (245).

It is, as Kant's successors found, possible—indeed, unavoidable—to find this recommendation both intriguing and relatively empty. We are barred from substantial knowledge of God's providence and from substantial knowledge of our destiny. As Kant remarks in his 1784 "Universal History" essay, nature "reveals something, but very little" of a path toward a kingdom of ends (1963, 22). How, then, is orientation "in complete conformity with the whole of [one's] destiny" possible? The categorical imperative sets certain fixed prohibitions and certain abstract ideals, but it is far from delineating this path. At the very least, substantial imaginative casuistry coupled with historical and cultural understanding will be needed.

How, then, within present cultural practice might a sense of orientation be effectively achieved and sustained? A number of possibilities were suggested and canvassed in immediate reaction to Kant. I will sketch six, with breathtaking speed. The latter five in particular involve a turn toward the use of narrative and some narrowing of a difference between philosophy as a discipline (at least when ethical questions about cultivation are in view) and certain forms of literary practice.

(1) One might undertake to provide a better grounding for a philosophical system that describes both the emergence of discursive consciousness and its path toward a destiny of achieved freedom. This representationalist-descriptivist-theoretical stance is, crudely oversimplifying, the stance of

Reinhold and Fichte. Paul Franks (2005) has described very well the imperative toward system that dominates their thinking: all or nothing. One must understand everything—the discursive mind, its place in nature, its destiny, and the path toward it—or one will have understood nothing, or nothing really important. This alternative all-or-nothing maps, I suggest, onto the alternative: life as a fully achieved human subject or death in reactivity and ungrounded conventionality. A difficulty of this stance, as Fichte already comes to see in his political turn, is that the emphasis on correct theoretical representation of our condition reinforces the turn toward reflection about representation that itself distances one from meaningful engagements in culture and practice. Its wages—however much the Fichtean Absolute is not an individual subject—are isolation and detachment, as well as desperate repeated attempts to ground the system convincingly.¹ And this suggests that the antithesis—either fully achieved, absolutely valuable and exemplary human life, or death in life—is itself too sharply drawn. Surely there must be a middle way? But how is it to be found, once the sense of the possibility of death in present conventional social life has arisen, so that something new needs to be done?²

(2) Hegel, too, pursues the imperative toward system, but in contrast with Reinhold and with much of Fichte, he sees the description of our stances as possessors of discursive consciousness as always bound up with practical attitudes in culture that are held by both the describer and the object of description. *Teilnahme*, participation, absorbs and informs any purely representational stance. Stability comes only at the end of history, when theoretical description and practical stance within culture have settled into mutual transparency, as a result of the long march of trial-and-error, of the labor of the negative. Here, to put it mildly, one may wonder whether any such settling really has or is taking place. Perhaps in certain ways, in certain regions of North Atlantic culture, say, *en mesure*. But the relations between such settlings as exist and persisting instabilities surely still remain to be worked out.

(3) One might, against the imperative toward system, emphasize the spontaneity of the human subject that is bound up with the ability to reflect and to think things otherwise. This is, of course, the way of Schlegel and Witz, more recently urged on us as well by Blanchot and by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (see Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988). The power of spontaneity—the power to think and act otherwise, with improvisatory aptness—in the face of what is done is not to be scanted. Exercise of this power is bound up with feeling oneself to be a subject at all, and that feeling

deserves some nurturance. As Blanchot puts it, “to speak poetically is to make possible a non-transitive speech whose task is not to say things (not to disappear into what it signifies) but to say (itself) in letting itself say, yet without taking itself as the new object of this language without object” (1993, 357). One may, however, nonetheless wonder, even after all contextualist constraints have been specified, whether enough stability in life is afforded by the cultivation of irony and agility. What J. M. Bernstein calls “theoretical exorbitance” (2006, 157) attaches to philosophizing always on the run, so that a certain nomadism results. Beginning, always and always over again, “Jena Romanticism,” in Bernstein’s words, “cancels any synthesis, harmonization, riveting together of materiality and the social sign” (158). It is no accident that the Jena Romantics produced no great literary works. Without at least some stable enough harmonization of materiality and the social sign, a collapse into succumbing to the evanescent blandishments of consumerism is possible. I might, that is to say, wittily and ironically “buy” this or that—my style of dress, my friends, my books, my religion, my household furnishings, or my spouse—and so be pulled apart, never really recognizing myself as a subject over time.

(4) Underlying spontaneity, *Witz*, and agility, one might appeal to the affordances of what Benjamin called unseen affinities or Adorno, following Benjamin, called fugitive experiences. The dominant economy and its culture may be commodified. But there remain pockets of resistance—the oddly difficult work of art that cannot readily be replicated in a fungible commodity or the traces of childhood where there is a sense of thickness of experience, as in Benjamin’s *Berliner Kindheit*—that might be allowed to resurface with complex disturbatory and partially recuperative effects. Trauma and loss might be worked through, and some lines of self-continuity might be achieved, despite trauma and loss. Energies might be heightened. One might also think here of spots of time in Wordsworth or of certain moments in Proust. Both literary practice and philosophical criticism might undertake the work of discerning and reanimating the fugitive intimations of something beyond commodity life that may be found in both art and life. This, too, is not a suggestion to be scanted. But one might again wonder here just how much stability is enabled, and just what criteria there might be for evaluating and integrating the affordances of various fugitive intimations. One could further wonder what the costs of yoking disturbance even in part to self-recovery and self-stability might be. Such a yoking may somewhat underrate the artistry of the work and the disruptive powers of art.

(5) Instead of system, spontaneity, or the recovery of the fugitive, one might invest one's energies in the work of forming an artistic presentation or *Darstellung*, hoping to direct and stabilize these energies within the activity of artistic construction itself. This idea runs throughout defenses of the autonomy of art from any instrumental purposes, and it is usefully developed in David Wellbery's recent critical writing on Goethe and Eichendorff. Wellbery terms this strategy of artistic construction the pursuit of the simulacrum. "The presentation, which in mimesis possesses a transparency that is oriented toward an ideal realm of depth, attains in the simulacrum its own proper thickness" (2006, 147; my translation). The result of this pursuit of a proper thickness is, in Eichendorff's "Wünschelrute" and "Der Abend" and in Goethe's "Der Fischer," "a romantic lyric that is separate from all enthusiasm for nature and closeness to the folksong, and that is instead to be understood as an investigation of the intrinsic possibilities of a medium" (151). (Wellbery concedes that the performative aspect of mimesis—the text's transmission of a message about something—is also important. Here he is principally correcting an overemphasis on message as against the powers of the work itself to engage and absorb us.) The strategy of constructing absorbing works has the advantage of engaging the subject and its powers in actual courses of constructive artistic labor and of promoting identification with the artistic subject capable of such construction. It brings into view the possibility of some stability for the subject in attachment to the continuing labor of artistic making. If, however, all claims to represent something beyond the medium are suspended, then there is at least something of a danger of a flight from life into formalism and aestheticism.

(6) Finally, there is Hölderlin. What is most distinctive about Hölderlin's approach to the problem of orientation is his development of the doctrine and poetic practice of *Wechsel* or modulation. In Hölderlin's hands, *Wechsel* comes to mean appropriately modulated alternation among various poetic moods: heroic, naïve, ideal, and so on. More abstractly, Hölderlin's practice of *Wechsel* embodies the thought that "a conflict is necessary between [1] the most original postulate of the spirit which aims at [the] communality and unified simultaneity of all parts, and [2] the other postulate which commands the spirit to move beyond itself and reproduce itself" (Hölderlin 1988, 62). The subject alternates, that is to say, between moments of receptivity and absorption, on the one hand, and moments of striving, form-making, and self-assertion, on the other. (Dieter Henrich sums this up as the persistence of the conflict between love and selfhood within Hölderlin's writing [1997, 127–28].) Narration of the alternation of

such moods displaces theoretical grasp of something “over against” the subject as a means of finding and sustaining valuable orientation in life. The hope of Hölderlin’s poetic practice is that the alternations that mark his writing will be not brute, but modulated. They will embody a working through and bringing into relative (but not perfect) balance of the conflicting tendencies toward love-absorption-stability and selfhood-independence-departure that mark modern human life. This practice involves a certain foregrounding of an elegiac, lyric voice that is aware of its own alternations, and it involves also a certain commitment to endlessness of conflict and of the poetic registering of conflict, against the claims of theory. The wager is that the registering of conflict as modulation will enable enough recognition and stability on the part of the subject to go on, that it will yield just enough orientation, claiming neither too much nor too little. Commitment to reflection and to the work of writing is balanced against receptivity to and involvement in nature and others.

To recapitulate, the possibilities that are in view for thinking about how to achieve continuing, self-determining orientation for human subjects in post-Kantian modernity are:

1. Reinhold-Fichte: epistemological theory
2. Hegel: historical-descriptive social theory
3. Schlegel-Blanchot: spontaneity, agility, and wit
4. Wordsworth-Proust-Benjamin: recovery of fugitive experiences
5. Wellbery (following Eichendorff, Goethe): constructing thick artistic presentations
6. Hölderlin: the lyric that embodies modulation

Among these six possibilities, I find Hölderlin’s suggestion to be most capacious in incorporating elements of each of 3, 4, and 5. But what remains to be seen is exactly *how* in at least some exemplary cases 3, 4, 5, and 6 might fruitfully be combined. What, that is, might a successful, self-determining, orientation-intimating modulation of mood, constructed by spontaneity, taking up the recovery of the fugitive, and achieving thick artistic presentation look like? And how might such an orientation-intimating modulation help subjects in modernity to find some sort of assurance about value in life?

Though it does not have quite the directness in treating the powers and interest of literary language of either theories that tend toward formalism or theories such as Hölderlin’s that emphasize the agon of the reflecting

subject, Goethe's own poetic theory also embodies an effort to bring together spontaneity, receptivity, thickness of form, and modulation.³ Goethe's poetology is, however, not as well known as it might be, largely because it is most fully developed in connection with his metaphysics of nature, as he attempts to work out a comprehensive theory of human being in relation to a natural world that itself bears meanings. As Walter Benjamin insightfully remarked, "the place occupied in Goethe's writings by his scientific studies is the one which in lesser artists is commonly reserved for aesthetics" (1999, 172). More specifically, Goethe's morphology embodies the fundamental thought that everything that is is both interpretable and expressive in relation to human subjects. "Morphology rests on the conviction that everything that is must also show itself and be adumbrated. We take this fundamental principle to be valid for everything from the first physical and chemical elements up to the spiritual expressions of mankind" (Goethe 2003, 45; my translation). This may have little plausibility in the face of our experience of, say, iron ore or salt, or more broadly, of our materialist conception of the world. Our interactions with iron ore and salt have more to do with measurement, theorizing, and use than they do with interpretation or with deciphering meanings, in any ready senses of these terms. To this extent, we are, as modern subjects especially and as makers of meanings, cast into culture and outside the self-enclosedness of a physical nature that is externally available for use and as an object of theorizing. Goethe's theory of nature seems too much to look backwards toward older, discredited religio-mythological views.

This impression can be somewhat softened, however, when we note how Goethe specifically develops his theory of form in relation to objects that *are* interpreted, objects such as works of art and human actions of various kinds. Here Goethe observes that "form is a moving something, a becoming, a passing away. The theory of form is the theory of transformation" (45). This claim emphasizes the constructive activity of the interpreting subject who is positing forms as much as simply finding them immanent in things, and it emphasizes also that the construction of form is both bound up in time and answerable to changeable interests on the part of the interpreting subject. Form is both "the brought forth and the becoming of what is brought forth" (48). When it comes to poetic texts, this claim enables us to see the form of the poem itself—its way of holding together its beginning, middle, and end in an overall plot—as all at once materially embodied, emergent both for the author in the course of writing and for the reader in

the course of reading, shaped by interest and need, and temporally developing. As in Hölderlin's theory of modulation, the struggle to make meaning via modulation that lets something happen, that lets form emerge, and that is answerable to the needs of a temporally and spatially situated subject is more important than the statement of any ready doctrine or *Lehre*. Or, as Goethe himself puts it, "Because very few of our experiences allow themselves to be wholly articulated and directly communicated, I have for a long time chosen the means of a repeated reflection, so that I could through opposed and at the same time reciprocally reflecting images reveal to those who could notice the secret sense of things" (letter to Carl Jakob Ludwig Iken, September 27, 1827, cited in Witte and Otto 1996, 20; my translation). The task of poetry is then to allow our experience to express itself roundly and to be communicated, and this task is carried out through juxtaposing images that let sense and form emerge for those who pay attention in the right way.

We can, I think, make further sense of these poetological claims—both the Hölderlinian strategy of *Wechsel* and the Goethean strategy of juxtaposition for the sake of the emergence of sense—by turning to theories of what makes artistic expression distinctively different from other forms of meaning-making that are either more prosaic or more nakedly revelatory of self, without craft and control.

Art in general involves, I have argued (following many others), the attempt to achieve the expression of emotion and attitude—a way of seeking satisfaction of a desire that one's ways of responding to and feeling about perplexing initiators be endorsable. Am I right to feel perplexity, sadness, I don't know what, in relation to an initiating scene or incident? This is the question that is all but explicitly on the minds of many imaginative literary writers as they work. To get some feel for how this is so, we might think, for example, of Shakespeare in writing *Hamlet* as undertaking to figure what to think and feel about the competing claims of honor-tradition-clan vs. individuality and about the proper roles of conscience, proof, eros, deference, family piety, and so on in sorting out these competing claims.

Making a poem, play, or other work of literary art can, then, be a way of exploring and resolving emotions, thoughts, and attitudes that arise in relation to perplexing scenes and incidents of life. Exactly how might artistic writing manage to do this? Considering well-known theories of emotion and expression in art can help us to address this question. These theories fall into three main groups.

(A) There are, first of all, *psychodynamic* theories of artistic expression. Such a theory is often ascribed to both Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood, especially if one focuses only on part I of *The Principles of Art*, ignoring Collingwood's subsequent general elaboration of a theory of human subject development and discursive consciousness and their relations to language and culture. Collingwood does hold that artistic expression is distinguished from ordinary planned making (*techne*) by the fact that the distinctions between planning and execution, means and end, raw materials and finished product, and form and matter have no place in it (1938, 20–25). This makes it seem as though artistic expression is nothing but a spontaneous welling up of emotion somehow—without thought or planning—manifesting itself in materials (words or stone or paint or bodily motions) that are being rhapsodically manipulated. Collingwood explicitly denies this implication, in distinguishing between the expression of emotion, which necessarily involves some control over the process, and the betrayal of emotion, which does not (121–24). He does not, however, at least in part I, give a very good account of the sort of intelligent control (that is not *techne*) that is exercised in artistic expression in contrast with betrayal. The advantage of a psychodynamic account, however, is that it emphasizes that burdens of feeling, attitude, emotion, and response are felt by human subjects and that these burdens can be discharged or lightened through expressive activity. Something in us, that is to say, is getting out of us via artistic expression, in such a way that actually occurring burdens and perplexities of feeling and stance are lightened and calmed.

(B) There are, second, *structural-linguistic* theories of artistic expression, of the kind developed by Nelson Goodman and Alan Tormey (see Goodman 1996; Tormey 1987, 421–37). Goodman, in particular, defines expression as a species of signification that arises out of the conscious, skilled manipulation of a language or code with distinct structural features, syntactic and semantic. More specifically, expression is *metaphorical exemplification*, where *exemplification*, first of all, is possession of a quality (falling under a general term) plus reference back to the quality possessed (or the general term that is applicable). For example, a tailor's swatch possesses the color, weight, pattern, and weave of the larger bolt of cloth that it also refers back to; or a paint chip both possesses and refers back to the color of the paint that appears on it. Such swatches and chips are used as representative samples of general features that are also found elsewhere: the sample and what it refers back to share, as it were, an overall physiognomy. Metaphorical exemplification or artistic expression is then exemplification (possession

plus reference back) in an unusual, unexpected way. For example, Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata both possesses (the characteristic contour and rhythm of) sadness and refers back to sadness (Goodman 1996, 85–95).

The advantage of this account is that it highlights the craft or skill of putting significative exemplification into a work. Artists need not be, and typically are not, caught up in a rush of feeling in the moment in which they are doing their work. Instead they are paying careful attention to how in a medium to exemplify emotions in an unusual way: Rembrandt exemplifying in paint his love for Hendrikje Stoeffels by making the painted canvas possess and show it; Liszt exemplifying his melancholy yet serene religiosity in his late *Transcendental Etudes* by making them possess and show it, and so on.

This disadvantage of this account, however, is that it underrates the importance of feeling-with on the part of the audience. Successful expression becomes, apparently, colder than in psychodynamic theories, a matter of embedding properties in a work so as to convey a message rather than issuing to an audience invitations to participate in feeling and its clarification. Hence it both misses the importance of having emotions to having a point of view as a subject in general and, more specifically, misses the passions and urgencies that drive both artistic making and response to art. And it misses, further, the singularity of successful artistic expression, where we want, often, to dwell in or with the work—to experience just its way of rendering thought and emotion in its materials—rather than decoding it to find some more general message about kinds of emotions.

(C) Third, there are *intransitive* theories that focus on distinctive success in the formal arrangement of materials; *expressive* is treated as a near-synonym for *successful*. Garry Hagberg (1995, 103–9) and Roger Scruton (2004, 1–9) have developed theories of this kind. Such theories often take as their point of departure Wittgenstein's remark in *The Brown Book* that there is an "intransitive . . . usage" of the word "particular" to convey "an emphasis" (1958, 158). Similarly, we can use the word "expressive" as a commendatory adjective, as in "her playing was expressive," without filling in that it is expressive *of* anything. The advantage of this view is that it highlights both the importance of care in producing the work and the singularity of success: one work may be successfully expressive in this way, while even a closely similar work is not: in certain simple sonatas, a single note or two here or there may make all the difference between Mozart and Czerny. The disadvantage of this view, however, is that it does not show how

satisfaction in doing the work of formal arrangement is driven by and bound up with matters of feeling. Hence this view at least drifts toward a more decorativist formalism.

It seems reasonable to conclude that there are some insights and some blind spots in each of these three views. We should try to integrate the insights of each of them while avoiding their missteps. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth begins usefully to develop just such a synthetic view. In poetry, he argues, the aim is not the straightforward communication only of information about an object, but rather the presentation and clarification of feeling in relation to it. "The feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation, and not the action and situation to the feeling" ("Preface to the Second Edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800)," in Wordsworth 1965, 448). When the work of poetry goes well, then the poet will "describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his *affections strengthened and purified* (448, emphasis added). The idea, then, is that the successful poetic work presents both a subject matter and a course of thoughts and feelings about the subject matter, with the aim of working through the thoughts and feelings, via the formal arrangement of words that present subject matter, thoughts, and feelings, until the thoughts and feelings become evidently more apt in relation to the subject matter. Our affections—how we are invested emotionally in things, positively or negatively—become strengthened and purified, in being purged of anything accidental and inappropriate to their objects.

This Wordsworthian stance is a primary source (along with materials on clarification from Aristotle, Spinoza, and Collingwood⁴) for an elucidatory definition of art that I have proposed and defended. (This definition is elucidatory in that it seeks not taxonomic exactness or the transformation of difficult or borderline cases of whether something is a work of art into easy ones, but rather an illuminating explanation of the functions in human life of the practices of art, as achieved in a wide range of exemplary cases.) That definition is that a work of art is a presentation of "a subject matter as a focus for thought and emotional attitude, distinctively fused to the imaginative exploration of material" (Eldridge 2003, 259 and below) for the sake of *working through* one's emotions in relation to a community of some extent that shares with the artist both a world and emotions in relation to it.⁵

The production of a work of art, and especially of a work of poetry, begins, then, with an initial disturbance or puzzlement or perplexity occasioned by an object, person, scene, or incident. One feels, somehow, something, but exactly what one feels, why one feels it, and whether one's feeling is apt to its initiator are all less than clear. The response to this perplexity that literary art achieves is then to find the narratively apt cause of a now more specifically articulated and acknowledged feeling that is now more evidently appropriate in relation to an overall situation. That is to say, one tells a story; one rehearses what is or may be going on in the course of having a feeling. This involves asking, what in the initiator is perplexing, and why? How and why, for example, am I perplexed, troubled, or transported in this specific way by this initiator? And it involves narrating the course of development of feeling itself as the story of its occasioning is generated, so that the feeling itself becomes caught up in reflection and so further specified and articulated, as one is guided in narrating by an effort to find the exact word, image, and cadence in sound that will yield clarity. Or, to revert to Wordsworth, descriptions and sentiments are presented in connection with each other in such a way that our affections are strengthened and purified. The fact that the situating of thoughts and feelings within an overall course of development (guided by the search for apt comparisons and for cadential resolution) *clarifies* them helps to make sense of what Aristotle means in saying both that plot is "the origin and as it were the soul" (1987, 9) of tragic drama and that a successful narrative plot presents "things that are possible in accordance with probability or necessity" (12). The soul of lyric in particular is specifically the narratively structured working through and articulation of emotion in relation to an initiator, so as to achieve greater stability, calm, formal success, and satisfaction in it (however ecstatic, horrific, beatific, disruptive, etc. the initial response may itself both be and remain). A narrative arc from disturbance to calm informs the process of working through, where working through is central to poetic process.

Remarks at this level of generality are all too likely to carry neither conviction nor intelligibility in the absence of detailed attention to a concrete example of the work of successfully expressive poetic art. It is impossible for any single work to illuminate clearly the powers and interest of all poetry, let alone of literature in general. But it remains possible to read a single poem closely, in the hope that an account of its powers and interest may at least serve as a model for how to begin to approach other cases.

J. W. Goethe's "Wandrer's Nachtlid II / Wayfarer's Night Song II" is the single most well-known short lyric poem in all German literature. It remains to this day the poem that German schoolchildren are given to memorize at the age of twelve or thirteen, so that it stands, for many, as the means of their first serious reflective encounter with serious adult literature. It was, famously, carved by Goethe into the wall of a traveler's hut on the top of the Gickelhahn, a small mountain overlooking the Thüringer Wald, outside Ilmenau, at about 8 p.m. on September 6, 1780.⁶ One can still climb the Gickelhahn today to see a reconstruction of the hut, just below the peak, with the carving reproduced. The poem has been set to music by at least forty-five composers, including Kempff, Liszt, Mendelssohn-Hensel, Reger, Schubert, and Schumann, as well as Ralph Shapey and Charles Ives. Just what did Goethe do in this short lyric poem, and why has it figured, and why does it continue to figure, so prominently in the German, and not only German, sense of the expressive powers of imaginative literature?

Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,
In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.

[Over all the hilltops
is calm.
In all the treetops
you feel
hardly a breath.
The little birds fall silent in the woods.
Just wait . . . soon
you too will be at rest.]⁷

In order to enter into the work of this poem, it is useful to begin by asking two fundamental questions: (1) Who is the *du*-addressee? and (2) What does *ruhen* mean?

(1) A number of possibilities for the *du*-addressee immediately suggest themselves. It may be the faithful little dog who has accompanied Goethe

up the mountain and who is now not quite yet settled to rest. No doubt this possibility is somewhat fanciful, but consider the last lines of “Gute Nacht!” the last poem in Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan*: “Ja, das Hündlein gar, das treue / Darf die Herren hinbegleiten” [Yes, the little dog even, the loyal one, / May accompany the masters] (in Goethe 2006, 118; my translation). Being accompanied by a loyal dog is a kind of metaphor or metonymy (perhaps both) for the achievement of trust, loyalty, and exemplary mastery in relation to an audience. “Gute Nacht!” is a poem about a hope for success as a human subject in writing. It begins “Nun, so legt euch, liebe Lieder, / An den Busen meinem Volke!” [Now, lay you, dear songs / In the bosom of my people] (117; my translation), and it concludes this expression of hope for reception with an image of a dog, freely devoting itself out of loyalty to accompanying its master.

Less fancifully, Goethe’s eminent biographer Nicholas Boyle argues that the addressee is entirely general. Specifically, “The ‘you’ is not—not specifically or by allusion—the woman [Charlotte von Stein] to whom Goethe was writing only minutes before, and after, he composed the poem” (1991, 266). This claim is part of Boyle’s overall argument that Goethe’s early poetry is “the poetry of desire” (the subtitle of volume 1, which goes up to 1790), more specifically of desire unstilled, but expressed. “The sources of his poetry ran deeper, and purer, than ‘the sweet conversation of my inmost heart’ that was his mental discourse with Charlotte von Stein” (266). Goethe practiced “an art not of possession but of desire, of a sensuous presence always suffused with recollection, reflection, or anticipation: that unfulfilled desire for the always absent object was the origin of his personal, as of his literary magnetism” (429). That is, Goethe’s poetry is the deep poetry of a discursive, commitment-and project-having consciousness that is cut off from perfect wholeness, thus given over to wandering and suffused with a standing desire for presentness. This all seems quite right. But it is also the case that a specific address to an absent lover might itself be an expression of this standing desire, be the claim to or hope for intimacy in wandering with another who singularly, but absently, is a synecdoche for the possibility of redemptive intimacy. The desire persists, because she is absent, but an intimacy is sought in relation to her in this moment of address.

More importantly, however, Boyle’s emphasis on the generality of the addressee points toward the addressee as either oneself (the poet himself) or anyone (or both). The thought is, “I have been in motion, first in climbing up here, and second in being busy in professional and social life (the life of

the Weimar court) about the affairs of the world, and calm for me has not been possible." And this thought about activity failing to yield calm, that is, about lack of full assurance in and identification with busy activity, is a thought that might come to anyone. In fact, the most natural reading of *du* in line 4 is "anyone," that is, anyone who might happen to be here in this spot at this moment; and anyone who, further, feeling this stillness might be prompted to share a sense of exteriority to the calm of bare nature, because caught up in busy activity, hence an intimate second subject or *du*. We will come in a moment to consider what thought and possibilities of feeling and consolation are then offered to such a *du*-anyone and how they might be achieved.

(2) What does *ruhen* mean? Surely, as with the English "rest," it means both *sleep* and *death*. As with the birds falling silent, sleep will come, and so, too, will death. T. W. Adorno made much of this connection in his commentary on the poem. "In the line, 'Warte nur, balde' the whole of life, with an enigmatic smile of sorrow, turns into the brief moment before one falls asleep. . . . In the face of nature at rest, a nature from which all traces of anything resembling the human have been eradicated, the subject becomes aware of its own insignificance. Imperceptibly, silently, irony tinges the poem's consolation: the seconds before the bliss of sleep are the same seconds that separate our brief life from death" (Adorno 1991, 41-42).

Much of this is right: *ruhen* does indicate both sleep and death. All traces of the human have been eradicated from nature. This is registered formally in the repeated U sounds and soft F's, as though nature were speaking a semiotic mother tongue that precedes ego formation and will outlast ego identity. (Against this musicality, *Hauch* and *Auch* then come as interruptive, then conclusive, moments of the enactment of identity. I will come back to this.) The poet is thinking about that fact—about a nature that will survive his eradication; that is, he is thinking about his own death and about the meaning, if any, of the life that will have preceded it. (Compare the opening of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey": "Five years have passed . . . The day is come when I again repose / Here, under this dark sycamore" [in Wordsworth 1965, 108; emphasis added].) Adorno's phrase "becomes aware of its own insignificance" implies that the restless, anxious striving to master the terms of significance has been first voiced and then, somehow, calmed. A movement from disturbed restlessness to acceptance has somehow taken place.

Adorno then argues further that the restlessness of the subject or the sense of being caught up in busyness arises from the experience being caught

up in modern commodity society. Goethe's lyric expresses a protest against that social world. "In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different. The lyric spirit's idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the beginning of the modern era, since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life" (Adorno 1991, 40). Here the thought that this particular lyric expresses at least in part a reaction to its particular social world is at least plausible, though I am somewhat inclined to say that it expresses a sense of undirected restlessness in the face of the stillness and self-continuity of nature, which sense of undirected restlessness might come to anyone in any culture, though it is perhaps more typical in modern commodity society. But it is surely right that the poem "expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different," a world in which the stresses of ego-formation and the bearing of ego-identity would be moderated or redeemed.

Just how does it do this? According to Adorno, the work resists commodity society and resists more generally a world in which undirected busyness predominates "by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself in accordance with its own laws" (40). That is, it achieves through aptness of reflection and formal artistry a coincidence of formal and thematic closure, and it achieves a kind of fullness of both attention to life and expression of that attention.

Adorno goes on to say that the speaking I in this poem "has lost [nature] as it were, and attempts to restore it through animation, through immersion in the 'I itself'" (41). (György Lukács makes a similar point about lyric in general in remarking that "at the lyrical moment the purest interiority of the soul, set apart from duration without choice, lifted above the obscurely-determined multiplicity of things, solidifies into substance; whilst alien, unknowable nature is driven from within, to agglomerate into a symbol that is illuminated throughout" [1971, 63].) To say that the "I" has lost nature is to say first that in possessing discursive subjectivity and reflectiveness, a human subject is not a being in and through whom everything simply happens, the way it happens in and through a leaf that changes color at a certain time of year. Rather, a human subject can reflect on and question its existence and so is not, or is no longer, immersed in mere naturalness. This not or no longer being immersed is experienced as a loss, an experience of loss that is perhaps exacerbated by the undirected busyness of modern commodity society. What is my choosing to be about this or that for? What, if anything, doth it avail? What does my life mean? These are the questions that

are on the speaker's mind—the thoughts that are disturbing him—within his experience of the stillness of nature.

The solution is then to achieve animation, immersion in the I itself. I take this to mean fullness of attention in expressing this experience; the achievement of wholeheartedness or fullness of cathexis in and to the activity of giving apt voice to what one's situation and experience are. We might further note that the formal craft of the poem, specifically its pattern of repetitions, functions to lend a stillness to nature. The repeated *Über-Ruh-du*—suggesting a musicality and the repetitive babblings of the prediscursive—of the first four lines is interrupted by the harder *Kaum-Hauch*, then restored by the *Ruhest-du* of the last line, with the rhyming *auch* lending formal closure. The “I” has then emerged from a prediscursive position, found this situation troubling, spoken with formal unity, clarity, and medial thickness, and so come to terms with its situation. Spatially, the movement toward calm and the acceptance of (disturbing) thought and feeling is indicated in the movement of the poet's gaze and attention downward, from the mountaintops to the treetops to the birds in the trees to, by implication, the ground (*ruhen*).⁸ Hence it can utter the *auch* that repeats the interruptive, percussive *Hauch*, and in echoing it achieves dramatic closure. That is, the speaking voice, having worked this material thematically and formally, can take responsibility for and find itself to be at one with this work. The father tongue, one might say, takes up, responds to, and closes the prior speech of the mother tongue, and so achieves its own proper fullness.⁹ Nature will continue beyond the life of the individual discursive subject, who will not know all. But life can be accepted and lived anyway. Having fitly exercised one's powers is worth something, is perhaps even a form of temporary satisfaction that is beyond normal, somewhat happenstantial work and love. In this way, love for life as a discursive, human subject is achieved or reachieved, despite the senses of loss and of immersion in undirected busyness. One has, at least, reflected, felt, thought, and written fully, anyway. “Es war *doch* so schön.”¹⁰ Or as Adorno puts it, “[The] pure subjectivity [of lyric poems], the aspect of them that appears seamless and harmonious, bears witness to its opposite, to suffering in an existence alien to the subject and to love for it as well—indeed their harmoniousness is actually nothing but the mutual accord of this suffering and this love” (1991, 41).

To bear witness to suffering in an alien existence, but to love that existence anyway (insofar as fullness of expression is possible within and in relation to that existence; fullness of the achievement of what discursivity and reflectiveness and language discover themselves to be for), and to bear

witness to that love as well—to do all this is to return to a sense of a harmoniousness of subjectivity with a nature and world that remain discordant from it, to move from disturbance to the thought and feeling that the world is good enough for us to live in it, at least to this extent: it has permitted this fullness of exercise of human powers of attention and expression. This strikes me as a centrally exemplary achievement—all at once formal, thematic, and emotional—of lyric and of art in general. I have no doubt that we need a more impersonal, constructivist politics of institutions, where compromises in social life will be necessary. I have no doubt that abstract, philosophical accounts of the nature of cognitive achievements in science and mathematics can be illuminating. Political philosophy and epistemology have their roles in life. But so, too, I think, does the aesthetic thinking—the thinking of the human subject in modernity in thick material forms—that this poem embodies.

NOTES

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1. On Fichte's repeated attempts to refound his system as a cycle of procession and epistrophe, see Eldridge (1997, 62–71).

2. On imaginative rehearsal as a response to a felt sense of possibilities of death-in-life, see Eldridge (2008, 69–85).

3. I am grateful to Hannah Eldridge for calling my attention to Goethe's poetology in his scientific writings.

4. Collingwood's full theory of artistic expression, arrived at only in part III, after he has developed his accounts of the development of the discursive subject and of the indispensable importance of the media of art and of the audience to successful artmaking, is much closer to the required integrative view of expression than it is often taken to be.

5. See Eldridge (2008, especially chaps. 1, 4) for a fuller account of the process of working through as it is carried out in and through poetic composition.

6. The circumstances of the composition of Goethe's two "Wandrer's Nachtlied" poems are recounted in Boyle (1991, 266).

7. In Goethe (2005, 34); translation modified from that by Hyde Flippo, which is archived at <http://german.about.com/library/blwander.htm>.

8. I owe this point to Jorie Graham in discussion at the University of Warwick.

9. I take the terms "father tongue" and "mother tongue" and the account of the relation between them from Stanley Cavell's adaptation/adoption of Thoreau's use of "father tongue" in Cavell (1972, 15–16).

10. Herbert Marcuse takes this line, which appears both in the "Türmerlied" ("Song of the Tower Warden") in Goethe's *Faust* and as the last words in Wedekind's *Pandora's Box*, as expressing a fundamental attitude of art toward life. There is a "reconciliation which . . . catharsis offers [that] also preserves the irreconcilable" (Marcuse 1978, 59).

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